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Helicopter parents continue to fly

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College administrators say they have noticed an emerging trend over the past couple years – overly involved parents who remain highly influential in their children’s lives, from class selection, to their social life to their problems at school.

Early reports on the phenomenon, dubbed “helicopter parents,” suggested the behavior had mostly negative consequences, mostly keeping young adults from learning to solve problems on their own and taking responsibility.

But more recent examinations show helicopter parents may not be all bad, according to Rick Shoup, a research analyst on the National Survey of Student Engagement – a massive annual study of behavior.

“Contrary to popular belief, students with such highly involved parents excelled in many areas, including deep learning activities, reported educational gains and satisfaction among others,” Shoup said.

The Bane

The term “helicopter parent” was used first by Wordspy.com in 1991, but has evolved since then. According to UrbanDictionary.com, “to the staff at the school, the helicopter parent is like the commercial for ‘Head On.’ They are insanely repetitive and not sure that you get the point. They are the bane of the dean’s existence. The parents who hover and spin their propellers while their kid lives in their shadow.”

This stunning description was a little harsh for Gia Taylor, assistant dean at the College of Education and the point person for Student Services at Arizona State University.

“I think that parents are getting a bum rap when it comes to involvement in their children’s lives,” Taylor said. “The term ‘helicopter parent’ connotes a negative tone that’s not always helpful. It says to a lot of people that they disempower their children and are inadvertently lessening their developing skill sets. What it really is is an abiding love of their child, so that [the student] can get the best shake they can from their education.”

Clearly, not all students agree with Taylor’s assessment.

With almost 50 Facebook groups just dedicated to overprotective helicopter-style parents globally, the “helicopter parent” seems to be lurking in the background of every aspect of these student’s lives. It would appear as if nowadays students cannot do anything without their parent(s) steering their every move.

Some say it is out of love for their child while others claim it is because there is a feeling of paranoia that their children will not get the most out of their young and developing lives.

Mesa Community College Student Lance McKee, said that his mother, specifically, is “ridiculous” when it comes to hovering and that some of his high school aged friends still make fun of him because of it.

“[My mom] is constantly on my case more so then a normal parent should be on their college age kid,” McKee said. “I think she just watches the evening news too much. She thinks everything that she sees on the news is going to happen to me.”

But Jim Boyle, the president of College Parents of America agrees with Taylor and said that what he experiences regularly is no surprise. But he qualifies his comments with a caveat.

“Ultimately, it’s because they want their child to succeed and be happy,” Boyle said. “But, these parents are unfortunately not looking at the long-run and that students need to learn from their own mistakes.”

Taking it too far

The worst of the helicopter parents are those that get too involved.

But Boyle said that, in reality, it is a small percentage of parents who are doing that by taking such actions as contacting deans and professors on their children’s behalf.

They are socially defined as the parents who feel obliged, and sometimes entitled, to intervene on issues down to what is to be worn on dates and how frequently you do your laundry. But, academically, the National Survey of Student Engagement recognizes them more broadly as those very often in contact with their children (in-person or electronically) and frequently intervening with college officials to help solve problems their child is having at the college.

When children make the leap from high school to the more independent lifestyle of college, some want support from parents, relatives and significant others to make a smooth transition. However when this gentle support turns into intense hovering, it “may inhibit student’s learning and development,” according to the NSSE.

“At every life transition, students become fearful along with their parents,” Boyle said. “It’s a leap of faith that this next stage of life is going to work out.”

But really, he said, “there are many more parents on the other end of the spectrum who are not involved enough.”

Helping Hand

Lindsey Olson, a freshman at ASU, is one of those students who seeks regular interaction with her parents.

“I personally enjoy having my parents support me,” she said. “Even though I absolutely hated it in high school because I thought they were way too strict, I realize they did it out of care for me and it made me a better person.”

“I used to think they were way too strict, and I guess they were, but we both learned from each other; they eased up and I compromised,” Olson said.

In recent years, as the members of Generation Y – people born from the early 1980s through 2000 – have come to the age where adulthood is on their doorstep, some could argue that support and nurturing from their parents has become more of an extreme sport than the gentle guidance it used to be in the past.

Prior to 2007, the NSSE report said it did not have any questions pertaining to helicopter parents or familial support because they had not seen a need for it. In an attempt to keep up with the cultural shifts of the current college generations, the NSSE surveyed 24 institutions through online surveys, all about this growing phenomenon.

The Survey reported that, during the first year of college, students had in-person contact with their mothers 62 percent of the time, and 54 percent of the time with their fathers. The numbers look very similar for graduating seniors; 65 percent with mothers and 57 percent with fathers.

“This high level of interaction is a pattern that started long before the students entered college, when they were still growing as young children,” Shoup said. “As a result, today students are more closely connected to their families than their predecessors.”

Overall, the NSSE report showed that students with helicopter parents get more out of their college experience because of their involved parents.

“As an opposite to what some educators and students alike believe, students who frequently talk with their parents and follow their advice participate more frequently in educationally purposeful activities and are more satisfied with their college experience,” said

Jillian Kinzie, an NSSE spokeswoman. "This is also true for students with so called 'helicopter parents' – those who intervened with institutional officials to solve problems their student encountered on campus."

Sarah Janes, a family and human development freshman at ASU, said that she understands why her mom hovers, but that she takes it way too far.

"[My mom] needs to be apart of my life still," Janes said. "I guess calling is not enough, so hovering is her way of doing it."

Tip of the Iceberg?

College officials and parents surveyed in the NSSE report also agree that this study is a sideswipe to the widely accepted notion that little good can come from parents that meddle in student's lives.

However, Shoup said that the NSSE's findings did not suggest that more parents should approach college officials on their student's behalf.

"While 'helicopter parents' on average do not seem to disadvantage their student, there are many students with highly involved family members who score much lower on the measures we used," Shoup said. Shoup did not speculate why because he said that "it is a very subjective situation."

Boyle said that while the "helicopter parent" is normally looked at through a negative lens, there is something good that students get from them.

"The energy from parental involvement is very real, and if channeled into productive uses, it can only be good for the student," Boyle said. "The 'helicopter parent' tends to be painted as only negative. It's only natural for parents to be concerned about student's success. It's figuring out for all three parties: Student, school and parent to form support groups to further the student's success."

Anne Shields, director of the Career Planning Center at Maine's Bowdoin College, wrote a six-page essay about "helicopter parents," and if they are really a help, or a hindrance.

She wrote that many of the college administrators that deal with this regularly are concerned about the noticeable increase in parental involvement in the daily lives of their college-aged students.

"My mother still checks my bank account everyday to keep track of what I am spending ... she will go as far as ask asking exactly what I bought at each store," Janes said. "This gets to be a bit much. How do I explain the red cups and ping pong ball?"

To future students, Boyle has a word of advice.

"I think that, if anything, the research suggests that Generation X parents will be much more involved than Baby Boomer parents are now," Boyle said. "Generation X kids have demanded greater accountability and are willing to take action to get what they want. If you thought Baby Boomers were bad, you ain't seen nothing yet."